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Merkel's Germany needs to show stronger commitment and responsibility in Europe



Has Germany shown enough solidarity with other EU states during the Covid-19 outbreak? [John Ryan](#) explains that the future development of the EU will depend largely on whether Berlin is willing to assume leadership and work closely with Paris. Under Merkel's leadership this commitment has been lacking, so it will most likely fall on a new chancellor to keep the EU and Eurozone together.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, the CDU/CSU/SPD coalition government in Germany had seemingly run out of steam, and disaffection among Germans had become noticeable. Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives had done badly over the last couple of years in most elections.

But now, only a few weeks later, Germans are suddenly overwhelmingly in support of their government again. Citizens clearly tend to place trust in the political leadership they know during times of crisis. Germany's health system has proved particularly competent at responding to different stages of coronavirus infections across the country.

Despite some of these displays of structural strength, Germany, once a powerhouse in European diplomacy on the world stage, is on the retreat. The next German government is likely to either lack the political will or the consensus to significantly enhance Germany's power in international affairs. It will take a major external shock to upset Berlin's pragmatic inclinations. The paradigm of an "ever closer union" has been lost in German and European politics. German leaders have given up on the concept. French president Emmanuel Macron may purport to defend it, but the Gaullist ingredients of his own Europe strategy weaken his claim. Europeans will not be shapers but observers of events in the future – although this may not become obvious or painful any time soon. The EU's return to the global stage has been lost in the muddling through of the twenty-first century and Germany bears a special responsibility for this.

It can be felt in Berlin, in Brussels, and in many other capitals around the European Union: Europe is not what it used to be. As the geopolitical winds have turned and blown into the faces of European leaders, confidence in their ability to address challenges as a union is running low. Yet Europe's identity crisis cannot be understood without looking at Germany. Once the champions of an "ever closer union of the peoples of Europe", the Germans appear to have lost their compass due to changes in Berlin's status in Europe.



Angela Merkel at a European Council meeting in February 2020, Credit: [European Union](#)

If Europe is not what it used to be, this is largely because Germany is not what it long wanted to be. The key question now seems to be, how much longer can the current gap remain between the challenges to Europe's integrity, prosperity, and security on the one hand, and Berlin's ultra-pragmatic, status quo-minded course of non-action on the other?

Chancellor Angela Merkel's Germany seems to have given in to the status quo, preferring erosion out of inaction to disruption out of ambition. Thus, the reasonable option seems to be to patiently manage the status quo, pragmatically adding bits of substance here and there when the situation allows.

Any agenda for "more Europe" would in any case fail to win a majority in the German political class today – or even among German voters, despite their rather positive attitudes towards European integration. The Germans continue to like "more Europe" as a distant vision, but they reject it as an operational strategy. The German elite has developed a taste for a national approach to the European agenda – which, conveniently, it can pursue while using widespread doubt about the feasibility of deeper integration as cover. The national approach puts the defence of one's own short-term interests over presumed European interests; it helps fend off spending demands from others.

To be clear, pursuing a policy based on Germany's national interest and strengthening Germany's national means could be a new strategy for steering and advancing European integration. In this scenario, Berlin would demonstrate its ability to act independently of the EU – something that it could, in practical terms, articulate in the areas of foreign, security, and defence policy because of their low level of integration within the union. Although costly in financial and political terms, this much more capable Germany might scare its European partners into wanting deeper integration. Merkel would not want to foster such fear of Germany as she sees nothing to be gained from it – meaning that it would just raise the transaction costs for Berlin in Europe.

The German presidency of the EU will run from July to December 2020. A successful presidency, Merkel allies believe, would burnish the chancellor's legacy as a stateswoman who helped hold Europe together and stood up for global multilateralism in turbulent times. The Covid-19 crisis has made this very difficult.

Pandemic aside, over the same period, however, a number of risks roll up against such plans. This might include: the election as CDU leader and chancellor candidate of a Merkel-sceptic with whom she could not rub along; signs that the authority split in her party might lose it the election or make Germany's EU presidency a flop; and a CDU meltdown over China policy.

This political crisis in Germany has also cast doubt on the country's ability to play a more prominent role internationally. The US, for instance, has often criticised Germany for not spending enough on defence, and Berlin is still far from fulfilling the pledge by NATO allies to spend 2% of GDP on defence by 2024. The German military has been under criticism for being "underequipped, understaffed and overly bureaucratic," as a recent parliamentary report revealed. The fallout from the 2015-2016 refugee influx has polarised Germany's political landscape and hollowed out support for the mainstream parties, leaving Merkel beleaguered on all sides.

In the Federal election campaign in 2017, Merkel declared at a packed beer hall in Bavaria that it was time for Europe to "take its destiny into its own hands." Unfortunately, Merkel has failed to keep that pledge. The European Union's promise to form an "ever closer union" seems more like an empty slogan than a strategy these days. Over the last year, Merkel delivered several lofty speeches about the need to maintain European Union unity and protect open societies, but she has said little about how those broad aims translate into actual policies. Merkel said in 2012 that there would be no eurobonds "as long as I live". After nine European heads of government wrote a joint letter in March 2020 saying the EU needed to "work on a common debt instrument", she said pointedly that that was not "the opinion of all member states". Merkel's Christian Democratic Union party remains opposed. This could prove to be a big mistake politically and economically.

The outlook for global trade and the domestic economy is very pessimistic, especially due to the Covid-19 crisis. Germany's consistently deficient defence spending makes it dependent on other countries such as the US, UK and France. A weakened and distracted Germany is the last thing Europe needs right now and will make it much more difficult for France and Germany – the twin engines of European integration – to agree on the necessary reforms to shore up the Eurozone's unresolved governance problems.

While Merkel may be admired outside of the country as the leader of the western world, the perspective is different from inside Germany, even if most recently Merkel's CDU has recovered sternly in the opinion polls and her personal rating is strong. Critics worry that Merkel has done a poor job of preparing Germany for the future, and it could get worse. This is despite the fact that she appears a safe pair of hands in comparison to US President Donald Trump or UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The future development of the EU will depend largely on whether Berlin is willing to assume leadership and work closely with Paris. Under Merkel's leadership this commitment and sense of responsibility has been lacking. It will therefore most likely be up to a new chancellor to renew the partnership with France in order to keep the EU and Eurozone together.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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